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Jul 31st, 10:15 AM - 11:15 AM

# Enhancing Workers' Attitudes towards their Jobs through Customer Orientation: A structural equation modelling approach

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Gazzoli, Gabriel; Hancer, Murat; and Park, Yumi, "Enhancing Workers' Attitudes towards their Jobs through Customer Orientation: A structural equation modelling approach" (2009). *International CHRIE Conference-Refereed Track*. 30.  
<https://scholarworks.umass.edu/refereed/Sessions/Friday/30>

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## INTRODUCTION

If every reader of this article decided to open a restaurant, one reader out of four would go bankrupt or fail during the first year of operations; consequently, these restaurants would either be closed down or sold to another investor. According to Parsa, Self Njite, & King (2005), 26% of independent restaurants close or change ownership during the first year. Even worse, this figure increases to 57% for chain operations and 61% for independent restaurants (Parsa, et al., 2005) within the first three years. With such high failure rates, and as competition increases year by year, service restaurants must concentrate their efforts in establishing excellent human resources and customer-oriented strategies in order to provide excellent customer service to their patrons.

As employees and customers become the centerpiece of organizations with different needs, wants and demands, firms must attract and develop employees to become flexible, customer-oriented, and who have the power to meet the ever-changing service requirements set by customers. Developing customer-oriented employees requires certain processes, structures and controls. Employee empowerment is one of those processes and controls embedded in a customer-oriented strategy (Hartline, Maxham, & McKee, 2000; Kotler & Bowen, 2006). Empowerment is also viewed as an important managerial practice that leads to higher individual and organizational performance (Fulford & Enz, 1995; Bowen & Lawler, 1992; Hancer & George, 2003). In addition to empowerment,

organizations today look for different ways to improve the satisfaction, commitment and involvement of their employees since these attitudes were found to impact worker behaviors such as productivity, absenteeism and turnover (Robbins & DeCenzo, 2005). Different studies have attempted to investigate the drivers of organizational attitudes such as job satisfaction (JS), organizational commitment (OC) and job involvement (JI). One of the most recent work (Donavan et al., 2004) found that customer-oriented employees are more satisfied with their jobs and present higher levels of commitment than employees who have low levels of customer orientation (CO).

Given the importance of empowerment and CO, this paper seeks to answer the following questions: (1) Does empowerment enhance employee's customer orientation?; (2) How can restaurants enhance their employees' attitudes towards their jobs?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Employee empowerment**

Empowerment has been practiced in the business arena for a long time, but empirical research in this area is considered to be new (Lee & Koh, 2001; Spreitzer, 1996). Empowerment has been defined as job enrichment (Hackman & Oldham, 1980), as participative management (Lawler, 1988), as sharing power with or moving power (Kanter, 1979), as an experience of being empowered (Barnes, 2006) and as "a process of enhancing feelings of self-efficacy among

organizational members through the identification of conditions that foster powerlessness and through their removal by formal organizational and informal techniques of providing efficacy information” (Conger & Kanugo, 1988).

Since empowerment is a managerial control system that gives employees more power and autonomy to perform their jobs, it is logical to think that empowered employees could use this freedom to make customized and quick decisions to better serve their customers’ needs. To the best of our knowledge, few studies have tried to identify the relationship between empowerment and employee CO. Strong and Harris (2004) attempted to investigate the relationship between employee empowerment (independent variable) and CO in the high-tech industry. With a sample of 902 workers they found this relationship to be significant ( $p < 0.01$ ). A similar study conducted by Peccei and Rosenthal (2001) concluded that some empowerment variables such as job competence, job autonomy and internalization of service excellence had strong relationships with CO behaviors ( $p < 0.001$ ).

Based on the above literature this study predicts the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 1:* Empowerment will exert a direct and positive effect on workers’ perception of CO.

### **Research on Customer Orientation and its outcomes**

The management literature shows two views of CO, the first drawn from market orientation (MO) research, which argues that this concept is derived from

an organizational level of analysis as shown in several previous studies (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990; Narver & Slater, 1990; Deshpandé et al., 1993). Researchers have long argued that in order for organizations to achieve long-term success they must focus on their customers' needs (Deshpandé, Farley, & Webster, 1993). Empirical research has found a positive relationship between organizations exhibiting high levels of CO with firms' performances (Jaworski & Kohli, 1993; Narver & Slater, 1990). The second research view of implementing the marketing concept of CO focuses on the individual level. This research stream is represented by the pioneering work of Saxe and Weitz (1982), researchers who developed a two-dimensional SOCO scale (selling-orientation, customer-orientation) and found evidence that selling-oriented/customer-oriented employees had a significant impact on salespersons' performance. A more recent study from Donovan et al. (2004) developed a four-dimension conceptualization of CO, namely 1) need to pamper the customer, 2) need to read the customer's needs, 3) need for personal relationship, and 4) need to deliver the service required and found that employees' perception of CO had a positive and direct effect on their evaluation of JS, OC and organizational citizenship behavior (OC), and not vice versa as suggested in other studies. Donovan et al. (2004) explain the positive and direct impact of CO on JS, OC, and IJ through the FIT theory which has a general definition as "the congruence, match or similarity between the person and the environment" (Edwards, Caplan, & Harrison, 1998).

Donavan et al. (2004) addresses two approaches of fit-theory included in the literature: 1) the fit between the worker and the environment, and 2) the fit between the worker and the tasks associated with the particular job in context; also known as P-J theory. Using the two approaches of fit theory as a foundation to explain the relationship between service worker CO and workers' attitudes towards their jobs, it seems logical to think that employees who perceive higher levels of CO will tend to fit the service context better than those with lower CO. Consequently, they have a stronger sense of willingness or predispositions to serve, interact and meet their customers' needs. Thus, we argue that employees having a better fit to the service context will be more satisfied with their jobs than those with lower CO. Kim et al. (2005) collected data from employees from a Korean casual dining restaurant chain and found that employees' perception of service orientation (including the dimensions of customer focus and organization support) had a significant influence on JS and OC. Based on the previous literature this study predicts the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 2:* Employee CO will have a direct and positive effect on JS

*Hypothesis 3:* Employee CO will have a direct and positive effect on OC.

The uniqueness of our study is that it incorporates one more organizational attitude as an outcome of CO: Job involvement (JI). To the best of our knowledge the CO-JI relationship has never been tested before. According to Kanungo (1982), workers can show personal involvement in two different contexts; (a) the

specific or particular context which is a function of how much the job can satisfy one's present needs, and (b) generalized work context which is a function of one's historically caused function of cultural conditioning or socialization. In this study, JI is viewed as a function of how much the job can satisfy one's present needs and we use need theory to explain the not yet tested relationship between CO and JI. According to ERG theory developed by Alderfer (1969), there are three groups of core needs that motivate humans; 1) Existence, 2) Relatedness, and 3) Growth (ERG theory). The existence needs include physiological and safety needs which are the basics for man's existence. The relatedness needs are related to one's desire to maintain interpersonal relationships with significant other people such as family members, coworkers, friends and superiors. Growth needs according to Alderfer are those needs representing one's development, self-fulfillment and self-actualization. In other words, these are the needs for a person to make a productive effect on him/herself and on the environment in which this person functions. By breaking down the CO construct developed by Donovan et al. (2004) we argue that Alderfer's relatedness needs are in line with the CO dimension "needs for personal relationship". Since "reading the customer's needs", "delivering the service required" and "pampering the guest" (the other three CO dimensions) requires special skills and dedication from the service employee; and by accomplishing those tasks we can argue that the service worker would have a productive effect not only on himself (sense of personal

achievement), but also on his work environment (may result in a happier customer which is a goal of any organization). As mentioned earlier, these productive effects are the basis for one's growth needs. Park, Lee & Kabst's (2008) empirical work found that the needs for achievement, belonging and power were the most important needs in predicting OC and JI. Therefore, based on the needs theory and the literature discussed the following hypothesis is presented:

*Hypothesis 4:* Employee CO will have a direct and positive effect on JI.

Previous research also suggests that JS exerts a positive effect on OC (Brown & Peterson, 1993; DeCotiis & Summers, 1987; Donovan et al., 2004; Karatepe et al., 2007; Kim, Leong, & Lee, 2005; Williams & Hazer, 1986). Therefore, we predict the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 5:* JS will have a direct and positive effect on OC.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

### **Sample and Data Collection**

The sample of this study consisted of customer-contact employees of 9 restaurants located in central United States. One of the members of the research team made an initial contact with a restaurant owner and partner of a U.S. restaurant chain, who in turn contacted the managers of his 9 restaurants requesting them to support our research. In addition, three conference calls including the restaurants' managers, the researchers and the restaurants' owner



took place in order to clarify the goals and objectives of the research, specifically the data collection stage. The surveys were prepared both in English and Spanish due to a large number of Hispanic workers in the targeted restaurants. The survey translation was conducted by a professional translation company in Brazil. The translation was then presented to Spanish-speaking hospitality students at a major university in central United States to ensure content validity. The surveys packages including English and Spanish version of surveys and cover sheets were mailed out to the restaurant managers. Survey administration was coordinated by managers in those nine restaurants. The survey participants were assured of confidentiality and told that the information would be used for research purpose only.

The data was collected during two weeks in the month of June 2007. In total, the restaurants returned 308 employees' surveys representing an employee response rate of 79%.

## **Measures**

Our study used the following measures: A 12-item empowerment scale developed by Spreitzer (1992). A 13-item CO scale developed by Donovan et al. (2004). JS was measured using a single-item as we conceptualize JS as an overall emotional state stemming from one's job experience. A 3-item commitment scale developed by Donovan et al. (2004) from the work of Morgan and Hunt (1994).

And a 5-item JI scale adapted by Frone and Russell (1995) from the 10-item construct developed by Kanungo (1982). All the scales with the exception of JS were measured on a 7-point Likert type scale ranging from “1=strongly disagree” to “7=strongly agree”. JS was measured on a 5-point “1=very dissatisfied” to “5=very satisfied” scale.

## **RESULTS**

### **Sample**

Three hundred and eight respondents consisting of 69 (22.4%) males and 237 (76.9%) females participated in the study (Table 1). Nearly half of the employees were 20 to 24 years old (48.1%). The employees whose ages were less than 19 years old were the second largest group (38.6%). More than half of the employees (51.6%) had a college/technical degree, 22.7% had a high school degree and 14.9% had been in high school but did not graduate. Most employees (62.9%) had less than one year of experience with their current jobs, while industry experience varied among the employees. The vast majority of the employees were White Americans (82.8%) followed by Hispanics (6.5%). In terms of workload, 64.6% were full time workers and 34.4% were part time workers. While 92.4% of the respondents were line level employees, 5.2% hold entry level managerial jobs.

## **Reliability and Validity**

All measurement items were analyzed for reliability and validity purposes as it is shown in table 1. The results of this analysis are described below:

After an exploratory factor analysis, the empowerment construct showed three factors and not four as in the work of Spreitzer (1992); EMP factor 1: “Meaning” ( $\alpha = .873$ ), EMP factor 2: “Self-Efficacy” ( $\alpha = .782$ ), and EMP factor 3: “Influence” ( $\alpha = .859$ ). The CO construct showed four factors as in the work of Donavan et al. (2004): factor 1 – “Need to pamper the guest” ( $\alpha = .910$ ), factor 2: “Need to read the customer’s needs” ( $\alpha = .849$ ), factor 3: “Need to deliver” ( $\alpha = .827$ ), and factor 4: “Need for personal relationship” ( $\alpha = .801$ ). However, three items from the original scale were deleted due to their low factor loadings. The JS construct used a single-item indicator for global JS. The measurement error of its single item was set to 0 prior to estimating the measurement model due to potential identification problems (Yoon, Beatty, & Suh, 2001). The JI construct reliability test indicated that its Cronbach’s coefficient alpha is acceptable ( $\alpha = .906$ ). The OC construct included three items and the Cronbach’s coefficient alpha of this construct is .848.

**Table 1**  
**Final measurement items and Summary of Factor loading and Internal Reliability (N=308)**

Construct measure	Factor loading	Cronbach' $\alpha^d$	Mean	SD
<b><i>Empowerment<sup>a</sup></i></b>				
<b>EMP Factor 1</b>		0.873		
My work is important to me.	0.853		6.299	0.959
My job activities are meaningful to me.	0.877		5.854	1.167
I care about what I do on my job.	0.791		6.309	0.937
<b>EMP Factor 2</b>		0.782		
My job is well within my scope of abilities	0.695		6.610	0.860
I am confident about my ability to do my job.	0.880		6.698	0.724
I have mastered the skills to do my job.	0.862		6.370	0.909
<b>EMP Factor 3</b>		0.859		
My opinion counts in group decision making.	0.662		5.172	1.567
I have freedom to determine how to do my job.	0.791		5.250	1.510
I have a chance to use personal initiative in my work.	0.634		5.958	1.151
I have an influence over what happens in my work.	0.778		5.198	1.568
I decide on how to go about doing my job.	0.792		5.383	1.483
I have a great deal of control over my job.	0.786		5.085	1.423
<b><i>CO<sup>b</sup></i></b>				
<b>CO Factor 1 “need to pamper the customer”</b>		0.910		
I enjoy nurturing my customers	0.842		5.600	1.472
I take pleasure in making every customer feel like he is the only one.	0.780		5.893	1.215
Every customer problem is important to me	0.822		5.711	1.516
I thrive on giving individual attention to each customer	0.690		5.844	1.282
<b>CO Factor 2 “need to read the customer needs”</b>		0.849		
I naturally read the customers to identify his/her needs	0.779		5.922	1.219
I generally know what service customers want before they ask.	0.842		5.714	1.285
I am inclined to read the customers body language to determine how much interaction to give.	0.702		5.932	1.205

<b>CO Factor 3 “need for personal relationship”</b>		0.827		
I enjoy remembering my customers name.	0.892		5.557	1.583
I enjoy getting to know my customers personally.	0.848		5.727	1.376
<b>CO Factor 4 “need to deliver the service”</b>		0.801		
I enjoy delivering the intended services on time.	0.770		6.169	0.991
I enjoy having the confidence to provide good service.	0.749		6.390	0.890
<b>Employee Job Satisfaction<sup>c</sup></b>				
Overall job satisfaction.	1		4.149	0.764
<b>Job Involvement</b>		0.906		
To me, this job is a very large part of who i am.	0.872		4.994	1.710
I am very much personally involved with this job.	0.863		5.364	1.498
This job is a very important part of my life.	0.881		5.253	1.664
The most important things that happen to me involve this job.	0.695		3.883	1.854
Most of my interest are centered around this job.	0.732		3.854	1.827
<b>Organizational Commitment</b>		0.848		
The relationship my firm has to me is something to which I am very committed.	0.927		5.608	1.164
The relationship my firm has to me is very important to me.	0.946		5.589	1.123
The relationship my firm has to me is very much like being a family.	0.612		5.378	1.402

Notes:

a. **Empowerment** -Total variance explained = 80.461

b. **CO** -Total variance explained = 68.756

c. **Job Satisfaction**- Single-item indicator for global job satisfaction, and its measurement error was set to 0 because of identification problem.

d. All factors are reliable (Above 0.6 is acceptable for the study (Nunnally, 1988)).

Our model proved evidence of internal consistency; empowerment (CR= .93), CO (CR= .0.97), JI (CR= .0.94), and OC (CR= .92). Also, the discriminant validity was proved on the basis of Fornell and Larcker’s (1981)

criteria; empowerment (AVE = .54), CO (AVE = .81), JI (AVE = .66), and OC (AVE = .71).

*Empowerment:* After measurement model results for 'model fit test', the empowerment construct fits the data well because indicators of model fit such as goodness-of-fit index (GFI), the adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI), the normed fit index (NFI), the increased fit index (IFI), and the comparative fit index (CFI) are .975, .944, .975, .993, and .993 respectively. The root mean square residual (RMR) was .045 and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) was .035 respectively.

*CO:* The CO construct fits the data well. The GFI, AGFI, NFI, IFI and CFI had scores of .978, .954, .984, .997, and .997 respectively, and RMR and the RMSEA had a score of .052 and .029 respectively. The CO measurement model is good.

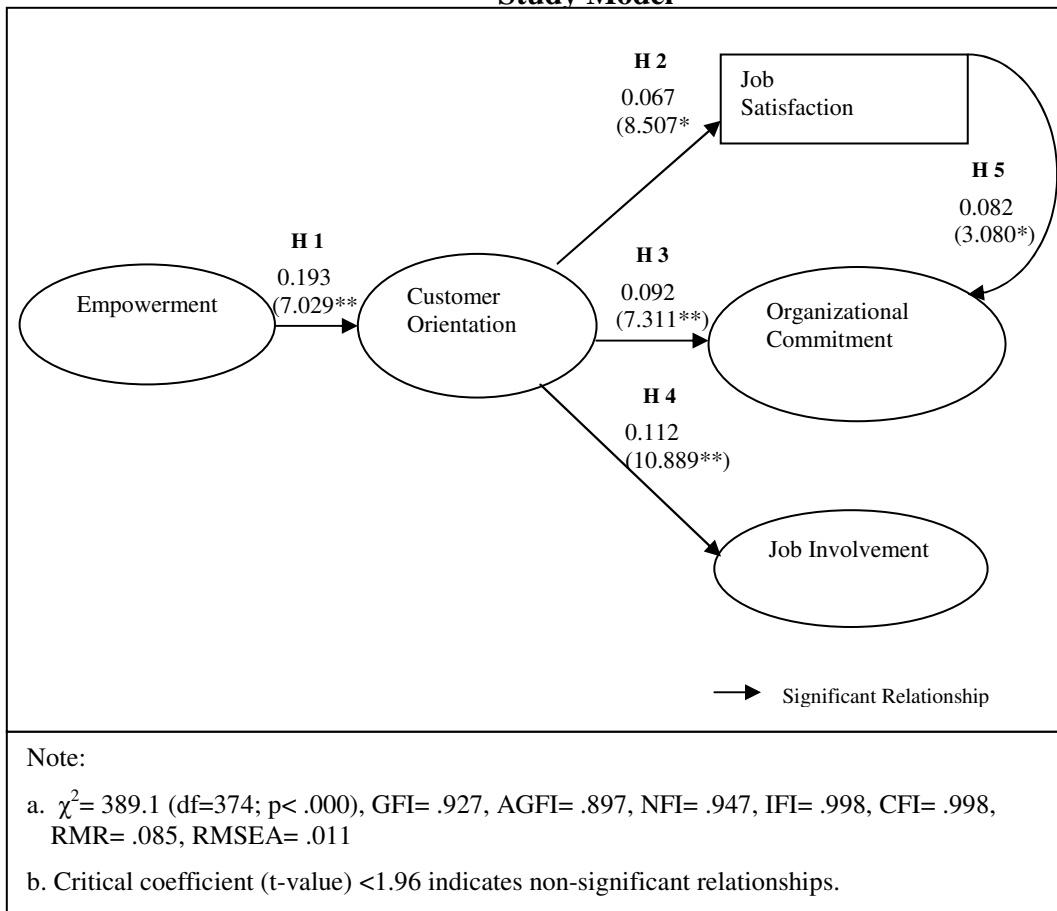
*JI:* The JI construct fits the data well. The indicators of GFI, AGFI, NFI, IFI, and CFI are .993, .963, .995, .998, and .998 respectively. Also, the indicators of RMR and RMSEA are .038 and .052 respectively. Therefore, the measurement model is also good.

### **Structural Model Results and Hypothesis Testing**

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used in verifying cause and effect relationships among empowerment, CO, JS, JI, and OC. The model

indicates that a chi-square of 389.1 with 374 degrees of freedom ( $p < 0.000$ ). The indicators of our structural model are: GFI .927, AGFI .897, NFI .947, IFI .998, CFI .998, RMR .085, and, RMSEA .011. The results of SEM show that the hypothesized model fits the empirical data well as shown in figure 1.

**Figure 1**  
**Study Model**



As a result, the verification of our hypotheses are presented as follow: The relationship between “Empowerment” and “CO” is significant (S.E.=0.193, C.R.=7.029,  $p = .000^{**}$ ) and thus, hypothesis 1 is supported. Hypotheses 2, 3, and 4

are supported. The results indicate the significant relationship between CO and JS (S.E.=0.067, C.R.=8.507,  $p = .000^{**}$ ), between CO and JI (S.E.=0.112, C.R.=10.889,  $p = .000^{**}$ ), and between CO and Commitment (S.E.=0.092, C.R.=7.311,  $p = .000^{**}$ ). The hypothesis 5 is also supported because the relationship between “JS” and “Commitment” is significant (S.E.=0.082, C.R.=3.080,  $p = .002^{*}$ ). The hypotheses verification summary is shown in table 2.

**Table 2**  
**Hypotheses verification**

Hypothesis				Direct effect			p-value
				Estimate	S.E. (Coefficient)	C.R. (t-value)	
H1	Empowerment	→	CO	1.357	0.193	7.029	0.000**
H2	CO	→	JS	0.567	0.067	8.507	0.000**
H3	CO	→	JI	1.224	0.112	10.88	0.000**
H4	CO	→	Commitment	0.674	0.092	7.311	0.000**
H5	JS	→	Commitment	0.254	0.082	3.080	0.002*

Note:

a. Critical coefficient (t-value) <1.96 indicates non-significant relationships.

b. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .001$

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to test a proposed model suggesting the benefits that restaurants may reap by having a customer-oriented culture and customer-oriented workers. Our research model empirically explored the role that empowerment plays on CO, as perceived by the worker, and the effects of CO on three very important job related attitudes amongst employees, including JS, OC



and JI. In the design of our model, we view employee empowerment as one organizational customer-oriented culture and strategy that plays a key role in the psychological state of service workers. When supervisors empower their employees, jobs become more important and meaningful to these workers and as a consequence, they are more concerned about their tasks. In addition, empowerment gives a sense of self-efficacy which increases employee's confidence in their own abilities to perform the required tasks. Last, giving freedom and power to employees may affect their perception of influence in their jobs. In other words, empowered employees feel that they are included in decision making processes and that they can use their own initiative and decide on how to go about their jobs to better serve the customers.

The analysis of this study has shown that empowerment exerts a positive and direct effect on the perception and attitude of employees' CO. Restaurant organizations applying an empowerment culture can enhance employees' predisposition to meet customers' needs. For example, if employees find meaning in their tasks, they will likely feel a natural joy or need to pamper their customers by nurturing them. In addition, if workers feel that the job is important and meaningful to them, they will be inclined to give their customers individual attention as well as to correct any customer service related problem (need to pamper the customer). Employees who are confident about their abilities (self-efficacy) may be likely to feel that it is important to anticipate their guests' needs

(need to read customers' needs), and find pleasure in delivering very good service and on time (need to deliver the service required). Finally, if employees have influence and control within their jobs, they can use their initiative to fulfill their own need to better interact and improve their relationship with their customers (need for personal relationship).

Our results also show that CO, as perceived by the employee, exerts positive and direct effects on JS, OC, and JI. In other words, workers who have high levels of CO will also have positive organizational attitudes. These findings are consistent with previous research on CO at the individual level, and are particularly important for restaurant managers, as JS, OC and JI may be linked with organizational behaviors of extreme importance, such as productivity, absenteeism and turnover (Robbins & DeCenson, 2005).

In an industry in which turnover rates have reached 83% for full-service operations (Ebbin, 2000) and has typically exceeded 120% in quick-service restaurants (Tracey & Hinkin, 2006), a customer oriented strategy through empowerment with the addition of customer oriented workers may play a big role in reducing these astonishing numbers. After all, turnover can be detrimental to any type of restaurant, as it affects revenue and expenses, which in turn affect the profitability of the business (Tracey & Hinkin, 2006). We therefore conclude that restaurant companies must establish excellent recruitment, selection, and training processes in order to attract, hire and retain employees who display high level of

CO. For example, a CO assessment test could be used in the selection of restaurant employees in order to identify the applicants' level of CO. Based on their CO levels, employers may be able to better place the right applicants into the right job. For example, an applicant who shows low level of CO must not be placed in high customer-contact positions such as table waiting, but instead they should start in low customer-contact positions such as food running. These employees can then be developed through a customer-oriented strategy and culture, which may change their internal drive to 1) pamper customers, 2) correctly read customers' needs, 3) develop relationships with customers, and 4) deliver a good service on time. As suggested by Donovan et al. (2004), customer-contact employees may find the greatest level of OC, and JS if they are placed in positions which employees are in constant contact with the customers, as high level CO employees feel a better fit to the environment and to the job.

To the best of our knowledge, no other study has attempted to examine the relationship between CO and JI. We explained this hypothesis by breaking down the CO concept and relating it to the theory of human needs and our results confirmed that CO has a positive and direct impact on JI.

Finally, this study has also proposed that JS influences OC. Our results support our proposition, which highlights the importance of having satisfied employees in the workplace.

## **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

As with any research, our study is not free from limitations. First, although several data collection training sessions with the restaurant managers took place in order to prevent bias, we still had to rely on them to collect our data. Therefore, we had very little control over the data collection phase, which ultimately may have influenced our findings. Second, since our data was collected in full-service restaurants, the findings of this study may not be generalized for all services industries; however, we find our study extremely relevant to the American restaurant industry sector since all participating restaurants were located in the U.S.A.

Research within the CO field is still needed. We can all agree that most customers like: 1) to be pampered, 2) to receive their service on time and with good quality, 3) to have employees who can read their needs and anticipate them, and 4) to have a good relationship and interaction with the people who are serving them. Some researchers concluded that the quality of interactions between frontline service employees and their customers has a direct and positive effect on customers' perception of service quality (Brady & Cronin, 2001), while others state that the service encounter is a key determinant of customer satisfaction (Kim, McCahon, & Miller, 2003). As Bitner, Booms, Stanfield & Tetreault (1990) suggested, customers tend to evaluate their service encounters with service-contact employees more favorably when the latter are able to adapt the

service to customers' needs and wants. Therefore, further research could investigate the relationship between service-worker CO, and customers' perception of service quality within the same research design.

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